

The Family Codicil

by Susan Fordyce

CHARACTERS

Karen Matthews

Winston Evans, Karell family attorney

Richard Karell

Charles Davidson, attorney

Margo Karell, Richard's wife

SETTING: The Karell mansion in the comfortable, wood-panelled den which had belonged to Judge James Stephen Karell—the father of Karen Matthews and Richard Karell—when he was alive. Two large many-paned windows look out onto the rolling countryside and reveal a bright, clear June day. A fireplace and mantel cover one wall. Over the fireplace hangs a large painting of a clown—a beautiful, colorful clown, not a hobo. There is a hand-carved wooden desk with leather chairs nearby. On the desk are a pen and pencil set in a brass holder, a telephone, a crystal paperweight, a small desk lamp, and three framed photographs of a clown with a man and two young children. Behind the desk is a wall safe. The room has been tastefully and expensively decorated and has a number of small expensive occasional pieces and accessories. There is a door in the wall opposite the fireplace.

TIME: The Present.

A Play in One Act. Noon. A weekday in mid-June.

(KAREN MATTHEWS, wearing sweat pants, a striped T-shirt, and scuffed, soiled, well-worn sneakers, stands looking out one of the windows. Her large well-worn, cloth bag lies on the floor near her feet. There is a casual ease about her, and she seems to be intently watching something. MARGO KARELL, well-dressed and with the air of self-importance, enters. Throughout Margo's presence on stage she continually puts her hand in the pocket of her skirt.)

MARGO: Oh, there you are, Karen. Richard and I have been looking everywhere. We knew you were here somewhere when we saw that truck of yours.

(KAREN remains at the window and does not respond.)

MARGO: Really, Karen, why do you always make people hunt you down? Life is so much simpler when people are where they're supposed to be.

KAREN: *(Remaining where she is and showing no apparent concern over the conversation.)* Winston's instructions said "Father's den." Perhaps you didn't receive the same instructions—or perhaps you misread them.

MARGO: *(Moving slowly around the room with the close attention and attitude of a new owner becoming accustomed to his new surroundings—as if settling in.)* Misread the instructions? Why, of

course, how silly of me. That must have been it. Attorney's instructions always have been miles over my head. But then we can't all be Wellesley like you, can we? (*Lifting a vase from the mantel.*) Exquisite. Simply exquisite.

KAREN: Such a relief, Margo, that you find my father's taste acceptable. Could it be that you have your eye on some of the choicer items? The house, for instance?

MARGO: That is what we're here for, isn't it, dearest? To divvy up the spoils. (*Looking Karen up and down.*) Speaking of taste, couldn't you have worn something a little more ... well, you know ... appropriate ... just for today? It's a blessing your mother isn't here to see you like that.

KAREN: This is your big day, not mine. The high point of my day will be taking 15 girl scouts to play softball at 3:30. I'm here because of Winston's letter. My father's will can tell me nothing I want to know. I would rather have my father than his money.

MARGO: That certainly is noble of you ... to have no interest in the money. With Paul still teaching mathematics at Harvard, I don't suppose a few million is going to make any real difference in your life. Besides, who knows, there may be a surprise or two in that will.

KAREN: Money isn't everything. And I wouldn't count on too many surprises if I were you. Carson told me about the visit you paid Daddy the morning he died. You've never fooled Daddy for a minute. Not since the first day Richard brought you home. Richard is the only one who hasn't figured it out.

MARGO: Whatever could there be for Richard to "figure out?" I simply dropped by to visit your father. Nothing sinister in that, is there? We had a lovely chat. He needed someone to talk to who cared about him. You don't seem to realize how lonely he'd been since your mother died.

KAREN: My mother has been dead for two years, and you suddenly saw that Daddy needed a friend. Please, Margo. Save it for Richard. Mother and Daddy lived in a world all their own with their own special language. They were almost secretive. They never even included Richard and me. It isn't likely you could have given him the kind of comfort he needed. Believe me your little visit did not fool him, not for one second.

MARGO: Who is trying to fool whom here? Just listen to little Miss Wellesley and her virtuous disdain for money.

(*RICHARD KARELL enters, and his presence interrupts the conversation. Neatly dressed in a light-weight suit, he has an air of self-contentment about him. He moves with the ease of a person who knows who he is and is comfortable with that knowledge. He goes immediately to his sister, gives her a warm hug and kiss, and then stands back and looks her over affectionately.*)

RICHARD: Karen, how lovely to see you. It's been too many weeks. You're looking as wholesome as ever.

KAREN: (*Returning Richard's affection.*) It's good to see you, too, Richard.

RICHARD: Where's Paul? Don't tell me he didn't come with you.

KAREN: He's at Bower's Lake with the kids. He'd promised them a

camping trip as soon as school was out. Besides he thought we could handle this business without him.

MARGO: He never was interested in the family . . . well, in the family.

KAREN: In the family what, Margo? Were you going to say "money?"

MARGO: No, just in the family. Some people leave important matters to chance. I'm not one of them.

KAREN: Yes, I know. You never were. And you're right about Paul's not being interested. But it's the money that doesn't interest him.

MARGO: (*Looking at her watch and going to the phone.*) By the way, and speaking of money, where do you suppose our Mr. Evans is? It would be nice to get this business underway. He said "noon" and it's already 12:15. What could be keeping him? Perhaps we should phone his office.

RICHARD: Relax, Margo, Evans will be here anytime. Carson will show him in.

KAREN: You have nothing to worry about. I'm sure Daddy arranged for Richard to get his fair share. If this were Mother's will, who knows? She might have given the whole thing to one of her charities.

MARGO: You just won't give your mother credit, will you? You always resented her work. Katheryn Jane Karell was such a lovely woman . . . always knew just the right thing to do . . . how to meet the right people. She had a . . . a flair about her.

KAREN: My mother, Margo, was interested in her committees and the awards she got for saving the world.

MARGO: You never did understand her. You've never understood women like her.

KAREN: You're right I don't understand. Saviors give me a pain.

MARGO: She wasn't a savior. She gave herself to the world. And she honored your father by doing it. Carrying his family name into the community . . . And you, too. She did it for you. Out of love for you.

RICHARD: I'm afraid Karen's right, Margo. Mother was gone much of the time. Family never seemed to be especially important to her.

KAREN: Mother knew little, if anything, about love . . . especially about the kind of love children need. She was a fund-raiser. Money.

That's what she thought was important. Money and recognition.

MARGO: You're missing the whole point. Money is important. It does matter. You both walk around with your heads in the clouds. What can be accomplished without money? Neither of you ever knew her. If you had known who she was, who she really was, you would never say these things. She gave you both the world, and you don't even know it.

RICHARD: She did give us a lot Margo . . . introduced us to the best people, sent us to the best schools . . .

KAREN: But those were things . . . just things. Where was she for us? Not around. Never around. Never where we could touch her. She left us alone so she could give us the best? She was nothing like Daddy. He was always there. Our birthdays. Oh, Richard, remember our birthdays and the clowns? Those wonderful, beautiful, funny clowns.

RICHARD: Yes, he always made sure we had a clown. I think he liked the clowns more than we did.

KAREN: And remember those circuses. That was one good thing Mother did, Margo, and I'll admit it. Every year she organized a circus for the St. Thomas Home for Children. It was the one project she included us in. We'd go with Daddy and have the best time. Of course, Mother was off doing her organizing while we were eating cotton candy and peanuts. But those clowns. . . how Daddy did love the clowns.

MARGO: Neither of you ever understood just how much your mother was doing for you . . . how much she loved you. Things are not always the way they seem. Your father knew. He knew who she was and what she had sacrificed. On the very day he died, he talked about how close they had been and how lonely he was without her.

RICHARD: The day he died? When did you talk to Father on the day he died?

MARGO: Well . . . that morning . . . I talked to him that morning.

RICHARD: You never mentioned you had called him that day.

MARGO: I didn't exactly call him. I . . . I came to see him. I sort of dropped in.

RICHARD: But why? You weren't in the habit of dropping in on Father. I don't understand why you came here and why didn't you tell me about it before now?

MARGO: It seemed unimportant at the time. I drove over very early. Carson had just lit a fire to take the chill off the room and was getting some papers out of the safe for your father when I arrived so he suggested I wait in here. He even brought me some coffee. I'm sure he didn't mind. It was all very pleasant. Then when your father came down, we had breakfast. I'm sure I wasn't in the way.

RICHARD: But why? Why did you come here?

MARGO: To talk to your father . . . just to visit, what else?

RICHARD: Since you and I had been here only two days before, "just to visit" doesn't make much sense.

MARGO: I was in the neighborhood, and I . . .

RICHARD: Margo, we live nearly 45 miles from here.

MARGO: Well, all right. I'm not ashamed of it. If you must know, I came to talk to your father about . . . well, about the way things are for law professors . . . how they . . . how they have to live on such limited salaries . . . how limited their opportunities are.

RICHARD: Oh, Margo, you should never have done that.

MARGO: How was I supposed to know he was going to have a heart attack that afternoon? I didn't cause it, you know. He had said on Sunday he didn't feel well. You heard him . . . you heard him say that very thing yourself.

RICHARD: Yes, yes, I suppose I did, but you should never have . . .

MARGO: I wouldn't have had to, you know, if you hadn't just settled for that ridiculous professorship. A man with your promise. Your talent. Your possibility. Stuck . . . drying up in front of a classroom of "eager" faces when you could have been a senator or a judge like your father. I married a man with a "future" . . . a social position . . . and . . . and . . .

RICHARD: And what, Margo? A father with money? Is that it? The

money? (*MARGO turns away from Richard and doesn't answer.*) Is that it?

MARGO: Yes . . . yes, that's it. Richard, if you won't look after our interests, then I will. You don't consider me. What about me? What do I deserve? To be stuck, drying up at faculty wives' luncheons? This is our way out. I'm not ashamed of my little visit. I was willing to do whatever I had to.

RICHARD: Well, then this is your day, isn't it, my dear? Evans will be here any moment, and your . . .

(*WINSTON EVANS and CHARLES DAVIDSON enter. Both men are dressed in conservative suits and carrying briefcases. EVANS is also carrying a small leather suitcase.*)

RICHARD: Well, Margo, your dreams are about to come true. (*Immediately he turns his attention from Margo and moves to shake hands with Winston Evans and his companion.*) Ah, Evans, nice to see you again.

WINSTON EVANS: Yes, yes, good to see you. May I introduce Charles Davidson? Richard Karell, his wife Margo, and Karen Karell Matthews. (*Everyone makes the appropriate gestures with handshakes and "how-do-you-do's."*) Mr. Davidson represents the interest of the St. Thomas Home for Children, which has been listed as a legal heir in your father's will. (*EVANS moves to the desk, sets the leather suitcase on the floor, places his briefcase on top, opens it, sits in the desk chair, and begins shuffling through his papers.*) If you will all have a seat, we can begin.

(*Everyone chooses a chair and sits down and there is soft chatter in the process. Margo sits in a chair which places her in front of the others.*)

WINSTON EVANS: Today, as you all know, we are here to reveal the last will and testament of Judge James Stephen Karell. I have three copies of the will. If you will take these . . . (*He hands one to Karen, one to Richard and Margo, and one to Charles Davidson.*) Trust funds which have been set up for each of the grandchildren are explained in the last five pages. The remainder of the behest which directly involves you all is quite simple and straightforward. Karen Karell Matthews is to be given the specified leather suitcase and all contents—which I have right here. Richard Stephen Karell is to receive the specified oil painting of a clown—the one hanging over the fireplace, I believe. The St. Thomas Children's Home is to receive all other moneys and properties as are contained in the estate. (*EVANS hands KAREN the suitcase.*)

MARGO: Impossible! Everything goes to the St. Thomas Children's Home?

KAREN: (*Starts to laugh.*) My God, Margo, you were right. There are surprises. Richard gets a painting. All your planning . . . all your work for nothing. And I get a suitcase.

MARGO: (*Standing and becoming considerably agitated.*) This must be a joke. A cruel and miserable joke. We're his family. The people who loved him.

KAREN: *(Begins opening the suitcase. Continues to laugh.)* You know, Margo, I nearly didn't come here today. But that look on your face after all these years of your scheming . . . that look alone was worth the trip. *(KAREN, while the other conversation continues, removes a note from the suitcase, reads it, and slowly removes a clown suit from the suitcase. It is the same clown suit worn by the clown in the painting. The others are so involved in Margo's reaction they pay no attention to Karen.)*

MARGO: You've obviously made a mistake.

WINSTON EVANS: No, Mrs. Karell, this is not a joke. And there has been no mistake.

MARGO: Well, there must be . . . or . . . or we'll contest . . . we'll contest the will. That's it, we'll make them change it in court. If you think we're going to stand still and let this happen, you are sadly mistaken. Isn't that right, Richard? Tell him. Tell him we're not going to let this happen . . . that we'll contest the will.

RICHARD: Margo, just calm down. I'm not sure we want to contest anything.

CHARLES DAVIDSON: You may not realize what this means to the Children's Home, Mrs. Karell. It would have had to close its doors if not for the generous support of Judge Karell and his wife. As you probably know, they have an especially close tie to the Home and have repeatedly helped us over the years. This is just one last kindness . . .

MARGO: Kindness? Inheriting an estate this size is hardly a "kindness." It's the opening of a whole new world. And if you think I'm going to stand by and let this money slip through our fingers . . . and let this foolish gesture ruin my . . . our . . . chances for a whole new life, think again. We're entitled to it. By rights, we are entitled to it.

CHARLES DAVIDSON: Of course, I appreciate your disappointment. I can see that this money meant a lot to you. But I hope after you have had time to reflect on the circumstances, you'll reconsider.

MARGO: *(Composing herself, she removes an envelope from the pocket of her skirt and begins walking slowly around the room with it in her hand.)* There will be no reconsidering, Mr. Davidson.

RICHARD: Margo, Father was entitled to distribute his money however he wanted.

MARGO: I said there will be no reconsidering, Richard. None. You will begin the necessary proceedings at once.

RICHARD: We'll discuss this later.

MARGO: There will be no discussion. You **will** begin proceedings this very minute.

WINSTON EVANS: Please, Mrs. Karell . . .

MARGO: Don't "please" me, Mr. Evans. If those proceedings are not begun at once, there will be some very sorry people.

RICHARD: What do you mean by such a threat? In what way will anyone be sorry?

MARGO: *(Shaking the envelope which she has been carrying at Richard.)* This, my dear high-and-mighty Mr. Harvard law professor, is what I mean. This. *(RICHARD starts to take the envelope, but*

MARGO *pulls away from him.*) No, no. Let me just give you the highlights . . . the salient points as you might say. St. Thomas Children's Home. Two-year-old girl. Illegitimate. Abandoned by mother. Adopted at age five by Daniel and Rebecca Lodge. Do those names sound familiar to anyone? Child named: Katheryn Jane Lodge.

RICHARD: My God, let me see that. Where did you get this?

MARGO: It just happened to be with those papers Carson removed from the safe that day I was here. Your mother was illegitimate. She was adopted. She was a nothing. You Karells with all your money, all your power, all your prestige . . . your mother was a nothing. And if you think I won't use this, you are very mistaken. All of your father's fine uppity friends will know—every last one of them—unless you contest that will.

(WINSTON EVANS and CHARLES DAVIDSON begin to collect their papers to leave. They are clearly embarrassed by this exchange.)

KAREN: *(KAREN standing behind the others with the clown suit held up in front of her.)* Richard. Richard, look. Look at me.

(RICHARD and everyone else turn to look at Karen. He is visibly stunned.)

RICHARD: My God, Oh, my God. The clown.

KAREN: Daddy's note says, "I hope this brings you as much joy as it did your mother." Richard, it was Mother. The clown Daddy loved was Mother.

(The attorneys leave without a word.)

MARGO: *(Standing in the center of the room and nearly screaming at Richard.)* I'm warning you. I'm warning you, Richard. Everyone . . . do you hear me . . . everyone will know.

(RICHARD has walked over to KAREN who is still holding the clown suit in front of her and put his arm around her shoulder. They leave without a word.)

CURTAIN